

# Pacific Standard

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## ON ITS 100TH BIRTHDAY, A PROHIBITIVELY POPULAR PARK SERVICE

As many millions of tourists descend on the national parks this season, is the agency overlooking its obligations under the law?

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Everyone knows by now that the National Park Service is celebrating its 100th birthday, taking its bow in the bright lights and basking in well-deserved praise. But enough about that. There are intractable troubles in park paradise. There are questions that must be addressed. For instance:

- *The New York Times*: “Are We Loving Our National Parks to Death?”
- *The Chicago Tribune*: “Attendance Quotas? Our National Parks, and the Mile-Long Line to See Them.”
- *National Parks Traveler*: “Does the National Park Service Need a Quota System for Peak Seasons?”

Good queries all — each touching in one way or another on the industrial tourism that perennially threatens to erode public trust in the park system and which the NPS seems unwilling (or unable) to address. And here’s one more question: By allowing huge and daunting crowds onto its landscapes, is our beloved National Park Service shamelessly breaking the law?

Nearly forty years ago, Congress passed the National Parks and Recreation Act of 1978. The law mandated the following:

**General management plans for the preservation and use of each unit of the National Park System ... shall be prepared and revised in a timely manner by the Director of the National Park Service. ... General management plans for each unit shall include, but not be limited to: ...identification of and implementation commitments for visitor carrying capacities for all areas of the [park] unit;”**

The agency was to create management plans that would include visitor carrying capacities — whether hard caps on visitor numbers, limits on group size, or rules meant to limit overuse of trails and campgrounds — in all areas of each park. And it was to do so in a timely manner. That was nearly 40 years ago. Since the Act’s passage, though, it seems the NPS has ignored, forgotten, or otherwise avoided the law’s requirements.

This summer Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility, a Washington, D.C.-based watchdog, published [a report](#) on the state of visitor carrying capacities at parks across the country. After reviewing the policies and plans of 108 major park service units—including 59 national parks, 19 national preserves, and 18 national recreation areas—it found that only *seven* had established any sort of carrying capacity plan. Of those seven, only one, the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area, had a carrying capacity plan for its entire unit. Others, like the Golden Gate National Recreation, had detailed plans for specific areas within their boundaries.

“The national park service needs an attitude adjustment,” says PEER executive director Jeff Ruch. “If you look at the news coverage this summer, crowds in the parks have been a growing topic of conversation. But in terms of a coherent response to this problem, the Park Service doesn’t want to offer one. If anything, the centennial campaign is designed to boost visitation even more.” Ruch adds that it will likely take litigation to get the NPS to follow the law.

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I checked in with officials at a few of the NPS’s better-known parks to see if PEER’s critique carries water.

“Yellowstone National Park does not have an established carrying capacity,” writes spokesperson Jody Lyle in an email. She notes, however, that the agency is currently conducting a “social science program” to determine how high visitation impacts the park.

“The NPS now defines carrying capacity according to the visitor experience we want to provide and condition of resources,” writes Timothy Rains, a spokesman for Glacier National Park. “We don’t have anything established parkwide.” He says that the agency is trying to establish a carrying capacity for Glacier’s main thoroughfare, the Going to the Sun Road, however.

At Yosemite, I learned that the Park Service maintains a carrying capacity of 20,100 people per day on the east side of iconic Yosemite Valley. “As far as I can tell, there are no designated carrying capacities for the rest of the park,” says spokeswoman Jamie Richards. She added later that she couldn’t comment on carrying capacities elsewhere in the park, and said more research would require a public records act request.

So there you have it: Three prohibitively popular parks—the kind of parks that most need detailed visitor management planning—operating without comprehensive carrying capacities and in violation of the letter of the law.

Jeffrey Olson, an NPS spokesman, doesn’t dispute the figures PEER uses in its report. In fact, he says that agency headquarters doesn’t even keep track of which parks have established visitor carrying capacities.

“Every park has different thresholds when it comes to capacity size,” he writes in an email. “It is because of this complexity that our office does not track which individual parks and facilities have established carrying capacity caps.”

That is a stunning oversight on the part of this country’s most iconic public lands agency. And it is a serious problem.

Last month, *Mother Jones* ran [an article](#) about the one-star reviews parks are receiving on Yelp. The article’s author mostly dismissed the reviewers’ complaints and most of them were, indeed, ridiculous. But if you look closely, there are some truly sad sentiments buried in there.

“Terrible experience,” writes one Yosemite visitor. “We drove into the park and were unable to find parking ANYWHERE. After two hours of searching for a parking space, we ended up leaving....”

“If you, like me, prefer your natural beauty without a steady stream of strangers standing in front, Arches [National Park] is a frustrating experience in summer,” writes another tourist. “Last night we hiked up [a] hill and narrow ledge to enjoy the magnificent Delicate Arch in the golden hour before sunset. Along with several hundred other people.”

These are the sorts of crushed-in-a-crowd experiences that people go to the parks to avoid. These are experiences that erode support for and trust in public agencies. After all, think how many people deeply hate their local DMV due to long lines and endless waits. Do we want people to harbor similar feelings toward our parks?

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Perhaps more ominously, overcrowding, lines, and the like are signs of public agency dysfunction. And such dysfunction draws free market fundamentalists like carrion draws condors. Organizations like the Property and Environment Research Center, a Koch-linked think tank in Montana, for instance, are constantly using stories about big crowds and maintenance backlogs at national parks to push user fees and privatization schemes. These efforts must be resisted, and the best way to do so is to help our public agencies become better.

The NPS is in a tight spot. Its staffing numbers are stagnant. Its inflation-adjusted budget, according to High Country News, saw an 8 percent decrease between 2005 and 2014. Meanwhile, an unprecedented horde of tourists has poured into park units over the last few years to celebrate the centennial. The agency *has* been trying to re-direct tourists to lesser-visited parks. It *has* been encouraging people to visit parks on the off-season. It *has* been deploying shuttles and other traffic reduction strategies. But, Olson argues, there’s much to do and limited resources to do it with.

“We tell people we are doing the very best we can to make sure people are having a positive experience, that they enjoy their parks and learn something and want to come back and share it with their family and friends,” Olson says. “But we are also 100 years old and a little frayed around the edges.”

Our elderly agency, in other words, needs support. If we want to abolish full parking lots, long lines, overcrowding, understaffing, and creeping privatization, we can push our political representatives to adequately fund the NPS, to bolster its budget and beef up its staff, to fix its maintenance backlogs and plan for a vibrant future. It’s an all-American answer at our fingertips: tax the rich, improve the parks we already possess, and build more for the diverse and growing population that wants to visit this country’s greatest landscapes. In the meantime, the NPS needs to read the law that regulates it and come up with carrying capacities, like now.